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## **So, where is queer? A critical geography of queer exhibitions in Australia**

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### Abstract

This paper interrogates the geography of queer exhibitions in museums and galleries in Australia. The analysis draws on data from Museums Australia's database of queer exhibitions (1982-2005), which are cross-tabulated with geographical variables such as location, scale and state/territory population. The findings show an uneven geographical distribution of exhibitions, how geography also frames the themes of queer exhibitions, and an imbalanced geography, in which regional histories are few, national and state scale histories are prevalent, and minimal exhibitions occur outside metropolitan areas. This is problematic because queer identities, communities and histories vary across scales and between places. Appreciation of geography is thus useful for developing policies and practices that ensure the diversity of queer communities and histories is represented and communicated in exhibitions.

### Keywords

where, queer, critical, geography, queer, exhibitions, Australia

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## ***So, Where Is Queer?***

### A Critical Geography of Queer Exhibitions in Australia

**Abstract** This paper interrogates the geography of queer exhibitions in museums and galleries in Australia. The analysis draws on data from Museums Australia's database of queer exhibitions (1982–2005), which are cross-tabulated with geographical variables such as location, scale and state/territory population. The findings show an uneven geographical distribution of exhibitions, how geography also frames the themes of queer exhibitions, and an imbalanced geography, in which regional histories are few, national and state scale histories are prevalent, and minimal exhibitions occur outside metropolitan areas. This is problematic because queer identities, communities and histories vary across scales and between places. Appreciation of geography is thus useful for developing policies and practices that ensure the diversity of queer communities and histories is represented and communicated in exhibitions.

**About the author** Andrew Gorman-Murray, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow in Human Geography at the School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Wollongong, Australia. His work focuses on geographies of sexuality and gender, particularly gay, lesbian, and queer appropriations of domestic, (sub)urban, and rural spaces.

## Introduction: a Geography of Queer Exhibitions

The title of this special issue asks the provocative question, "Where is queer?" This is, quite literally, the issue addressed in this paper, which interrogates the geography of queer exhibitions held in museums and galleries in Australia. Space, place, and locality overtly frame the themes of queer exhibitions in Australia; queer exhibitions appear to be predicated on representing queer community histories across the national, state and regional scales. Yet, an uneven geography underpins the spatial distribution and thematic range of these exhibitions. On the one hand, there are notable biases in the geographical distribution of queer exhibitions in Australia, and this is troubling because it means that museums and galleries have been unable to reach and educate the widest possible audience about queer cultures, communities and histories. On the other hand, there are also significant omissions in the geographical themes of these exhibitions. This is problematic because queer identities, communities, and histories vary between places and across scales, and this geographical diversity is lacking in exhibitions, prompting concern about their inclusiveness. An appreciation of geography is thus crucial for generating policies and practices that ensure the diversity of queer communities and their histories is represented in and communicated through museums and galleries. Although this is an Australian case study, these implications are transferable.

In this paper the term "queer" is used in a pragmatic manner, as a generic term covering gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender forms of sexual identity and community. "Queer" also has a more critical application in academic work, where it signifies fluid, unfixed, and non-normative constellations of identities and practices (Jagose, 1996). Recognising this complexity, "queer" is deployed as a pragmatic umbrella-term in order to signify the *diversity* of lifestyles and identities *within* gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities.

## Rationale and Context: Museums Australia Policy and Queer Exhibitions

Established in 1993, Museums Australia is the peak professional body for museums and galleries in Australia and works to ensure that museum and gallery collections are representative of the diverse history and culture of Australia. As part of that mission, Museums Australia maintains a number

of special interest groups, which develop policy and practice guidelines to achieve social and cultural inclusiveness in collections and exhibitions. One of these special interest groups is the Gay and Lesbian Alliance of Museums Australia (GLAMA), which seeks to ensure that a range of queer cultures, identities, histories and communities are represented in Australian museums and galleries.

To this end, in 1999 GLAMA produced the *Gay and Lesbian Policy Guidelines for Museum Programs and Practice*, the key document which establishes policies and practices around queer collections and exhibitions, and encourages greater representation of Australian queer communities in museums and galleries. As part of this documented mission, GLAMA also points to the need to recognise and represent the cultural complexity and diversity *within* gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities (Museums Australia, 1999).

There is no single gay and lesbian community. Like others in the community, gay men and lesbians may identify around common issues, without assuming a common identity.... Many of the differences are sensitive points of demarcation and should be managed carefully by the museum (pp. 5-6).

This includes "recognising the racial, cultural, social, economic and political diversity within these communities" (Museums Australia, 1999, p. 7).

What is omitted from this otherwise exemplary call is *geographical* diversity (Davison, 2006), which seems to be an increasingly important issue for Museums Australia. For instance, the Museums Australia National Conference 2006 was themed *Exploring Dynamics: Cities, Cultural Spaces, Communities*, and presentations drew attention to differences in communities, histories and exhibitions predicated on space and place. However, GLAMA's *Guidelines*, while invoking a host of differences within Australia's queer communities, do not consider how these communities might also differ across place and scale. Yet, as historians of queer communities have demonstrated, differences *do* exist. One obvious case is the varying histories of homosexual law reform across Australian states and territories, where consensual homosexual sex between men was legalised as early as 1973 in the Australian Capital Territory and 1975 in South Australia, but as late as 1997 in Tasmania. Likewise, differences exist between the histories of queer communities at the city scale, such as the early emergence of a notable "gay ghetto" in inner-city Sydney centred on Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, yet to be replicated elsewhere in Australia. A range of manuscripts

has been written based upon these geographical differences, including distinct queer histories of Sydney, NSW (Faro and Wotherspoon, 2000; Wotherspoon, 1991), Darwin, NT (Hodge, 1993), Queensland (Moore, 2001) and Tasmania (Morris, 1995). Yet, representation of geographical diversity in queer exhibitions is not urged by GLAMA's *Guidelines*.

This absence at the policy level has led to uneven representation and omission of geographical diversity in museum and gallery practice. This imbalance, in turn, generates a range of implications relating to both the audience and content of queer exhibitions. Consequently, the critical consideration of the geography of queer exhibitions presented in this paper provides useful information for future policies and practices concerning the inclusion of queer communities in museums and galleries in both Australia and beyond.

## Data and Methods

Drawing on a database of queer exhibitions maintained by GLAMA and research conducted on queer communities in rural Victoria, there is a record of 27 known queer exhibitions from 1982 to 2005 (Table 1). To analyse the geography of queer exhibitions, the data in Table 1 were cross-tabulated with a range of geographical variables, including the states, territories and cities in which they were held; the total population of each state/territory; and the estimated "queer" population of each state/territory. It was noted if the themes of the exhibitions were geographical, relating to queer histories, cultures and communities in specific places at particular scales, such as the nation, state or region. To assess the geographical diversity in these themes, data were subject to a content analysis, and exhibitions were collated into related spatial and scalar themes. These geographical themes were also cross-tabulated with the geographical distribution of the exhibitions to tease out further concerns about the geography of queer exhibitions.

## The Geographical Distribution of Queer Exhibitions in Australia

Table 2 enumerates the geographical distribution of queer exhibitions by state or territory. What is apparent is that New South Wales (NSW) has dom-

inated, hosting 44.4% of the queer exhibitions in Australian museums and galleries. This proportion is over twice that of Victoria and three times that of South Australia (SA), the second and third ranked states. What should be noted, though, is that NSW's dominance has declined since the end of the 1990s. Fourteen of the 27 exhibitions (52%) have been held since 2000, and only 5 (or 36%) of these have been in NSW (Table 2). The other notable figures in Table 2 are those that are *absent*, that is, the lack of exhibitions in Queensland and the Northern Territory (NT). The absence of exhibitions in Queensland is particularly noteworthy given it is Australia's third most populous state, with almost 4 million residents (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006).

These results show that there is significant imbalance in the geographical distribution of queer exhibitions by state/territory. This unevenness is particularly revealing when considered in terms of one of the basic remits of museums and galleries in Australia: to reach and educate the widest possible audience about the diversity of Australian cultures. While the people of NSW have been given comparatively many opportunities to learn about, understand, and appreciate the history of Australian queer communities, residents of Queensland and the NT have had no such occasion, with mixed results for other states and territories. This analysis, then, points to the gaps which need to be addressed if GLAMA is to meet its goal of representing the history of queer communities and communicating their contributions to Australian culture and history to the wider Australian public. The seriousness of this uneven geographical distribution of queer exhibitions and its implications for reaching wide audiences becomes even starker in Table 3, which compares the number of queer exhibitions per state/territory against state/territory populations. In terms of population, the absence of exhibitions in Queensland and the NT means that over 20% of Australia's population have not had the opportunity to visit an exhibition of queer culture within their state/territory of residence.

In order to enhance the geographical analysis of queer exhibitions in terms of audience opportunity, Table 3 also provides a calculation of the number of exhibitions per 100,000 people. The Australian average is 0.135 exhibitions/100,000 people. Rather neatly, four states/territories fall below this average, most obviously Queensland and the NT, but also Victoria and Western Australia (WA), while four lie above the average: NSW, Tasmania (although with only one exhibition), SA and the Australian Capital Terri-

Table 1. A chronology of queer museum exhibitions in Australia<sup>1</sup>

Year	State <sup>2</sup>	Institution/Organisation and Location	Exhibition Title
1982	SA	Constitutional Museum of South Australia, Adelaide	Becoming Visible: Lesbians and Male Homosexuals—from Oppression to Liberation
1982	NSW	Sydney Gay Centre, Sydney	Becoming Visible: Lesbians and Male Homosexuals—from Oppression to Liberation
1993	ACT	Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra	Australian Gay and Lesbian Culture and Recent History
1994	NSW	Australian Museum, Sydney	Prejudice and Pride
	ACT	National Gallery of Australia, Canberra	Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS
1996	NSW	Powerhouse Museum, Sydney	Absolutely Mardi Gras: Costume and Design of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras
	VIC	History Inverted, Melbourne [touring exhibition]	Forbidden Love, Bold Passion: An Exhibition of Lesbian Stories, 1900–1990s <sup>3</sup>
	NSW	Lewers Gallery, Penrith, Western Sydney [touring exhibition]	Forbidden Love, Bold Passion: An Exhibition of Lesbian Stories, 1900–1990s
1997	VIC	Castlemaine Historical Museum, Regional Victoria [touring exhibition]	Forbidden Love, Bold Passion: An Exhibition of Lesbian Stories, 1900–1990s
	NSW	Australian Museum, Sydney [touring exhibition]	Forbidden Love, Bold Passion: An Exhibition of Lesbian Stories, 1900–1990s
1998	NSW	78ers' Festival, Sydney	It was a Riot: Sydney's First Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras
1999	WA	Gay and Lesbian Archives (WA), Perth	Ten Years—In Visibility
1999	NSW	Newcastle Regional Museum	Hunter Pride: A Celebration of the Lives and Loves of the Hunter Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Community
2000	ACT	Old Parliament House, Canberra	Corridors of Power [exhibition includes a section on the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras]
2000	VIC	People Living with HIV/AIDS (Victoria), Melbourne	Legends Positive and Proud: A Victorian Perspective
2001	VIC	Pride (Victoria), Melbourne	Significant Moments [for the centenary of Australian Federation]
	NSW	Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (NSW), Sydney	Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know [for the centenary of Australian Federation]

Year	State <sup>2</sup>	Institution/Organisation and Location	Exhibition Title
	NSW	Liverpool Regional Museum, Western Sydney	Edges: Lesbian, Gay and Queer Lives in Western Sydney
	SA	South Australian Museum, Adelaide	Passion! 100 years of South Australian Gay, Lesbian and Queer Social, Political and Cultural History
2002	NSW	Liverpool Regional Museum, Western Sydney	Just Sensational: Queer Histories of Western Sydney
2003	NSW	Sydney	1973 Anniversary [title uncertain]
	WA	Western Australian Museum, Perth	The Gay Museum: A History of Lesbian and Gay Presence in Western Australia
	TAS	Entrepot Galleries, Hobart	Telling Tales
2004	VIC	Melbourne Town Hall, Melbourne	Gay and Lesbian Archives Exhibition
	SA	South Australian Museum, Adelaide	Out of the Shadows: a Celebration of our Community at Play
2005	NSW	Pine Street Creative Arts Centre, Sydney	57 Questions... Mardi Gras History Exhibition

1. Table adapted from GLAMA database.

2. Including territories. Key: ACT = Australian Capital Territory; NSW = New South Wales; SA = South Australia; TAS = Tasmania; VIC = Victoria; WA = Western Australia.

3. This was a touring exhibition, with three stops noted by GLAMA – Melbourne, Liverpool and Sydney. The exhibition was also shown in Castlemaine, VIC. Source: "Bold Love," 1997.

Table 2. Geographical distribution of queer exhibitions by states/territories

State/Territory	Number of Exhibitions	% of Total Exhibitions
New South Wales	12	44.4
Victoria	5	18.5
South Australia	4	14.8
Aust. Capital Territory	3	11.1
Western Australia	2	7.4
Tasmania	1	3.8
Queensland	0	0
Northern Territory	0	0
Australia	27	100

Table 3. Number of exhibitions by total state/territory population<sup>1</sup>

State/Territory	State/Territory Population	No. of Exhibitions	No. of Exhibitions per 100 000 people
New South Wales	6,549,175	12	0.183
Victoria	4,932,423	5	0.103
Queensland	3,904,532	0	0
Western Australia	1,959,087	2	0.102
South Australia	1,514,338	4	0.264
ACT	324,035	3	0.926
Tasmania	476,479	1	0.210
Northern Territory	192,900	0	0
Australia	19,855,287	27	0.135

1. The population figures used in these calculations are taken from the 2006 *Census of Population and Housing* (ABS, 2006).

tory (ACT). The figure for the ACT is particularly notable; at almost one exhibition/100,000 people its rate is 6.8 times the national average. It is also notable that one of its exhibitions, *Corridors of Power*, is a permanent display in Old Parliament House, which includes a section on the history of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. The figure for SA, which has hosted four exhibitions at a rate of 0.264 exhibitions/100,000 people, is also significantly above the national average. The notably higher ratio of queer exhibitions to population in the ACT and SA possibly reflects the longer history of progressive homosexual law reform in these jurisdictions; the ACT and SA were the first two states or territories to de-criminalise homosexual activity, in 1973 and 1975 respectively. At the same time, the relative success of queer exhibitions in the ACT and SA highlights the need for GLAMA to try to redress imbalances of distribution and audience opportunity for those states and territories under-represented in their share of exhibitions.

Moreover, it is also informative to compare the geographical distribution of queer exhibitions with the estimated geographical distribution of the same-sex attracted population in Australia. This is because GLAMA notes that queer people themselves are an important audience for such exhibitions; family and friends are also a key audience, as noted in the *Guidelines* (Museums Australia, 1999). This comparison is made in Table 4, although

Table 4. Geographical distribution of queer exhibitions against the estimated distribution of the same-sex attracted population by states/territories<sup>1</sup>

State/Territory	% of Same-Sex Attracted Population	% of Total Exhibitions
New South Wales	39.5	44.4
Victoria	25.6	18.5
Queensland	16.8	0
Western Australia	7.2	7.4
South Australia	5.9	14.8
ACT	2.5	11.1
Tasmania	1.7	3.8
Northern Territory	0.8	0
Australia	100	100

1. Population figures from the 2006 *Census of Population and Housing*.

given the difficulty in accurately determining the same-sex attracted population, it must be stressed that this is an estimate only. The data for estimating the geographical distribution of the same-sex attracted population is derived from the 2006 *Census of Population and Housing* (ABS, 2006), which includes data on same-sex couple households. This data is the most accurate representation of Australia's queer population.

Table 4 reveals further nuances that deepen the above discussion. While NSW dominates the proportion of exhibitions (44.4%), this is not significantly above its share of the queer population (39.5%). Rather, the ACT and SA have hosted a proportion of exhibitions well above their share of Australia's queer population, in a ratio of 2.5 for SA and 4.4 for the ACT. Again, this could very well relate to the longer history of legal and social change in these two jurisdictions. Tasmania is also well-represented, although this is based on only one show. While Victoria's proportion of exhibitions is surprisingly below its share of the queer population, again Queensland particularly stands out. While 16.8% of Australia's queer population reside in Queensland, no known queer exhibitions have been held there (or in the NT). This analysis therefore reveals *where* GLAMA must focus its attention in order to ensure that queer people themselves have better access to histories of Australian queer communities: Queensland, in particular, but also the NT and, to a lesser extent, Victoria.

## Geographical Themes of Queer Exhibitions and their Distribution in Australia

The above discussion of the distribution of exhibitions *vis-à-vis* audiences demonstrates unevenness in the communication of queer cultures and histories in Australia. But this is only part of the story. Just as there is uneven audience opportunity, the variation in the geographical distribution of exhibitions intimates that there is also unevenness in the content of these exhibitions. If exhibitions are absent or few in some states and territories, this strongly suggests that the queer communities and histories of those particular states and territories are also under-represented in the content of queer exhibitions in general. This second part of the discussion, then, turns to questions of exhibition content, asking what a geographical analysis reveals here (Table 5).

In SA, WA and Tasmania, state-scaled themes dominate, with only one of the seven exhibitions across these three states invoking queer history and culture at the national scale. This was also the earliest of these exhibitions, *Becoming Visible: Lesbians and Male Homosexuals—from Oppression to Liberation*, held in 1982 in Adelaide, SA. Even so, the summary in the GLAMA database notes that attention was also given specifically to the "SA scene." State-specific histories of queer communities are thus clearly the most significant theme in these three states (see Table 1).

In contrast, in Victoria and the ACT, national-level accounts of queer histories and cultures dominate. The only explicitly state-scaled exhibition in Victoria, *Legends Positive and Proud: A Victorian Perspective*, was also specifically about people living with HIV/AIDS rather than a broader history of queer people in Victoria. No known territory-based exhibition has been held in the ACT (or in Queensland or the NT, either). Here NSW is different again, and more diverse in its themes (perhaps reflecting the larger number of exhibitions hosted there). Notably, the largest group of exhibitions still focuses on queer history at the national scale. NSW also hosted the most exhibitions about the Mardi Gras, which is not surprising given that the event takes place in Sydney, although it is important to remember that the Mardi Gras merges with the national scale of queer cultural and political history. However, NSW is also the *only* state to feature queer exhibitions at the *regional* scale—two about queer lives in the western suburbs of Sydney, and one on the queer community in the Hunter region of NSW, centred on the city of Newcastle (Table 1). Such regional histories are otherwise absent from the data.

Table 5. Spatial and Scalar Themes of Queer Exhibitions in Australia

Theme	Number of Exhibitions
GLBQ Community History—National	8 <sup>1</sup>
GLBQ Community History—State-based	8
GLBQ Community History—Regional <sup>2</sup>	3
Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras	4
Total	23 <sup>1</sup>

1. The number of exhibitions is less than other tables because the two exhibitions that have been shown in multiple locations (*Forbidden Love*, *Bold Passion* and *Becoming Visible*) have been included only once each in the analysis of spatial and scalar themes. In both cases, the theme of gay and/or lesbian history was rendered on a national scale.

2. "Regional" includes exhibitions held about "suburban" queer communities in Western Sydney.

Does it *matter* that national and state scale themes dominate while regional communities are under-represented? From a geographical perspective, the scales through which social and political action are represented matter considerably. Marston (2000) and Smith (1992) contend that geographical scales and their attendant meanings are social constructions, used to frame understandings of power, exclusion and belonging. Communities, social groups and political action movements (such as gay and lesbian rights organisations)

organise themselves and their messages through the ways in which they divide and order space. The boundaries they draw, tentative and contingent as they may be, define the geographical scales that channel and limit their political horizons. (Agnew, 1997, p. 118)

Such arguments help explain why national and state scale representations are most prominent in queer exhibitions. Their importance relates to the political and legal power associated with national and state scales, that is, law-making with regard to decriminalisation, discrimination and same-sex rights are tied to these jurisdictions in Australia. Thus, decisions at these scales are important for defining queer Australians' sense of inclusion and belonging in terms of politico-legal rights. Queer exhibitions, in turn, reflect the relative importance placed on gains and exclusions associated with national and state political horizons.



While action and organisation at national and state levels helps to define belonging at national and state scales in politico-legal terms, everyday queer cultures and communities are enacted at a 'local' regional level; it is in everyday life that gains or exclusions are felt, celebrated and/or challenged. By extension, different queer identities are constructed at these various scales, so that regional, state and national queer identities and communities will differ (Gorman-Murray et al., in press; Rasmussen, 2006; Smith 1992). Moreover, queer communities, identities and histories show significant localised diversity across Australia, between different suburbs, towns, cities and regions. For example, even *within* Sydney, the two notable "gay-friendly" suburbs of Darlinghurst and Newtown have different communities and place-identities, one "homonormative" and the other "alternative" (Gorman-Murray, 2006).<sup>1</sup> These inner-city precincts differ again from Daylesford, Victoria, which is positioned as Australia's 'queer rural heartland' (Gorman-Murray et al., in press; Pope 2005). Yet the only regional communities represented in queer exhibitions are those of Western Sydney and the Hunter. In this context, it is important to encourage both a greater presence *and range* of regional queer communities in exhibitions in order to communicate the full diversity of queer communities and their histories. Since identities, communities and political formations are varyingly constructed through different places and scales, representing spatial and scalar diversity matters.

Further, regional diversity matters in another sense as well. With very few exceptions, queer exhibitions have been hosted within major metropolitan areas, not in rural or non-metropolitan locations. Almost all exhibitions concerning queer community history at the national or state scales have been held in the inner-city precincts of capital cities: Sydney (NSW), Melbourne (Victoria), Adelaide (SA), Perth (WA), Canberra (ACT) and Hobart (Tasmania). While three exhibitions have been held in Sydney's western suburbs, including two about queer communities in Western Sydney, this is still within the borders of Australia's largest metropolitan area. Likewise, the regional *Hunter Pride* show was hosted in Newcastle, also a metropolitan location (Australia's sixth largest city). The *only* one of these 27 exhibitions held in a rural locality was at Castlemaine, Victoria, which was one stop for the touring exhibition *Forbidden Love, Bold Passion: An Exhibition of Lesbian Stories, 1900-1990s*. The paucity of non-metropolitan locations for queer exhibitions must also be addressed in order to both represent the diversity of queer communities in Australia and increase audience opportunities to engage with queer histories.

## Conclusion: Implications for Museum Policy and Practice

A geographical perspective can augment understandings of queer exhibitions in museums and galleries more broadly. Although the data and findings relate explicitly to Australia, the implications of the results are useful for thinking about other national contexts as well, and can help the broader development of policy and practice with regard to queer exhibitions. A geographical analysis can uncover important information on both the thematic content of, and audience opportunities to attend, queer exhibitions. Such considerations are crucial if museums and galleries are to meet their fundamental remit with regard to queer cultures—that is, to capture and present the diversity of queer identities, communities and histories and to educate the widest possible audience about the contributions of queer cultures and communities to the broader society. In order to communicate the geographical diversity of queer communities, this study urges policy-makers and curators to pay greater attention to the geography underpinning the distribution and thematic range of queer exhibitions.

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## Notes

1. "Homonormative" refers to the normalisation of "white" middle-class men in gay communities and their histories, as is apparent in Darlinghurst. The "alternative" queer community in Newtown incorporates differences of race, ethnicity, class and gender.

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